

Church, an “eschatological” Manifestation of Another Reality at the Material and Intangible Post-Modernity

H. E. Gregorios (Papathomas)
Metropolitan of Peristerion*

“*The purpose of theology*” is to put an end to the ignorance of all matters¹

“Time present and time past / are both perhaps present in time future”
[T. S. Eliot]²

“The past reveals in the present [and in the future]
what the present [and the future] is able to see.”
[R. H. Tawny]

“When you don’t forget what’s coming, you look ahead”

Introduction – *Status quæstionis*

If we simply recognize that the term “post-modernity” is a human invention, born out of the dialectical relationship between the completely new and the old social and cultural phenomena, perhaps it suffices in itself for us to understand the great significance of the fact that the Church exists intra-historically as well as extra-historically/

* H. E. Gregorios (Papathomas), Metropolitan of Peristerion is Professor at the School of Theology of the National & Kapodistrian University of Athens.

1. Cf. St. John Climacus, *Kλῖμαξ/ The Climax*, chap. 30, 12.

2. Cf. “Burnt Norton”, *Four Quartets*: “Time present and time past / are both perhaps present in time future”.

eschatologically. Since the Church exists both *within* and *beyond* history, the Church can never be subject to either an early or late modernity or –subsequently– a post-modernity, nor to a conservative attachment to the past or antiquarianism. As we know, the Truth in which the Church ontologically participates never changes, is never renewed, nor does it grow old – it is always remains the same and unalterable, just as Christ is always “the same yesterday and today and forever” («ὁ ίδιος καὶ ὁ αὐτὸς εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας»)³. Nevertheless, how does the Church, which is equally within the boundaries of history and beyond them, speak about the phenomena which appear to man within the realm of history as unprecedented and novel, as is the case with our post-modern era, with its especially unprecedented anthropological and otherwise issues?

The answer to this question is that the Church is not only entitled but also called upon and obliged to act, having as its ultimate goal the healing of the difference (virtually non-existent yet occasionally experienced) between human intra-historical and eschatological existence. Or –to put it more succinctly– in every historical period and in view of the specific historical postmodern condition, the Church takes into account the human existence in its entirety –historical and eschatological– or, to use Pauline terminology, takes into account both *life in Christ* and *life with Christ*.

Bearing in mind the above, the already existed cataclysm of *virtual reality*, which unifies the planet in a globalizing way and prioritizes the intangible, the distant, and the remote, the one that resides on the other side of the virtual contact, dominating in space and occasionally in time, extinguishes the grace and the talkative water of the physical presence as the ultimate guarantee of communication. The “face-to-face” interaction is constantly diminishing. But it is this “face-to-face” communication that hypostasizes real interaction, and indeed the “communion” of persons. Even when it concerns confrontation, contradiction, opposition, dissent, disagreement, which is a declining aspect of the communion of persons, the “close encounter” potentially breeds position, conversation, coexistence and fosters the prospect of communion and unity.

3. *Hebr.* 13, 8.

However, virtual reality and its aftermath is already the condition in which we live and are called to accept; above all, we have to overcome the obstacle of deconstruction (the dominant characteristic of post-modernity) and to cultivate a living, ecclesiastical, eschatological discourse, as living as the Word itself.

Facing the “digital present and its future expansion”, our obsessive demonization of technology, which is advancing by leaps and bounds while at the same time feeds a blind fundamentalism, and our passive approach to it, put as in the rearguard, while in fact the Church and we Pastors, its leaders, are called upon to keep alive the tradition of the Church’s existence and primacy, opening new paths for our Pastoral Ministry in the already unfolding postmodern era.

The Church, society and man are not endangered by the rapid scientific advances. If anything can set them back, it is our own mutism and silence, or the heterochronic and heterocentric *discourse*. In other words, we can’t talk to the flock about the dangers of horseback riding when everyone travels by plane. After all, in the course of his historical course and quest, man has lived and continues to live in a fluid and variable state, comparable to –and similar to– that of the Universe, which he constantly seeks to conquer with the resources provided by technology. Man was faced in the primitive past the same fluid state, when he managed to construct the first tools and tried to impose himself on the surrounding space. The *homo sapiens* of the distant past who invented the wheel does not differ at all from the Renaissance *homo universalis*, who claimed to be in full possession of universal science and knowledge, and the *homo post-modernicus/homo post-recens/homometaversalis* of Postmodernity, who is seduced by the technological achievements of the present and fascinated by the vision of a future dominated by technology, even exoplanetary and extraterrestrial. Nothing can bind the word of the Church within and beyond any borders, since her word and her existence begins and comes from “out of this world”. Postmodern man’s sliding is not related to his movement from the *material (materiality)* to the *immaterial/intangible* (the dissolution of *materiality*) and to the intangible reality already under construction, but –as always– to his perverse downward desire – hostile to any notion of society and community– to dominate the other man, the

Other, as Cain did to Abel from the first steps of humanity. He is gradually and steadily proceeding to an artificial religious overcompensation in replacement of church society. Therefore, both the word and the manner of the Church are everywhere and always the same – receptive, transforming man and society in Christ's image and likeness.

Within the context of the dialogue between theology and technology, let us point out here that technology –which is not a discourse on art, yet technical in the literal sense of the word–, made to apply theoretical knowledge in practice with expertise and skill, draws from man's continuous evolutionary effort and is a gift of God. Thus, we need not struggle with the words or the essence of the technique. It is of little importance whether the modern problems of Ecclesiology and Anthropology in our time are included in the concept of technique, or whether the method of solving these problems is included in this concept. The search for a solution and the process of solving problems is neither unilateral nor one-sided, not because the problems are complex and multilateral, but because the vision of the problems – and therefore modern man's will to solve them – is called into synergy with the presence of the Holy Spirit, who acts within history and as man's ancillary⁴. That is, the man's will and Paraclete's blowing/breathing constitute the one and only way out of the labyrinth of the deconstructed post-modern Ecumene. Endless proposals and plans on paper have already existed and continue to exist. The second millennium has bequeathed us with many ecclesiological, hitherto unsolved, issues; as if these were not enough, at the beginning of the third millennium, we have entered into the field of novel anthropological issues and are dividing man into material and intangible reality; we are moving one step further into the abyss of the Platonic division and separation of man into (material) body and (immaterial) soul.

Do we really have the mind of Christ, as the Canons say? Or do we, wrapped in our selfish vanity, we are fooling ourselves that we are articulating a theological discourse, while in reality we are willy-nilly preserving a *non-delivered tradition* that we have constructed as an embankment? Or, having immersed in a spiritual slump and convenience,

4. Cf. «Ἐδοξε τῷ ἄγιῷ Πνεύματι καὶ ἡμῖν», *Acts* 15, 28.

inappropriate for Shepherds, we disavow every single historical and eschatological voice and work, which would permit us to confront the corruption of death through the vision of Resurrection?

To be more specific, we are called upon to jointly face unrelenting realities, which have already begun to emerge with our entry into the newly arrived new third millennium, and which are what differentiate our era from the Modern one, which has already completed its cycle. Modernity's dominant feature was the *relativization* of institutions and concepts, whereas the Post-modern era is characterized by the *deconstruction* of institutions and concepts. The latter will contribute to corresponding situations of post-institutional and post-concepts, as it is the case with the following neologism: “*post-ecclesiality*”! We have already entered in the era sealed by the notion of “post-”, at many levels of life.

Post-Modernity and Post-Ecclesiality

A Theological Approach to the Question

From the historical emergence of the Church on the Pentecost birthday until our present, Post-modern era, it is evident that there appear within the Church –to use a term of the *Synodikon of Orthodoxy* (843)–, two ... “winters”, the dry cold of which the Church was and is called upon to confront and overcome. Indeed, the *Synodikon of Orthodoxy* preserves for us a testimony to the Church’s state during the 9th century – a state of decadence and corruption, which began in the previous 8th century with the beginning of Iconoclasm (731) and essentially a whole century (731-843) of total decadence, characterized by *external* warfare on the part of the Empire and secularized society against the Church, but also by *internal* decadent erosion from within, coming from the accredited members of the Church.

The *Synodikon of Orthodoxy* strikingly characterizes the decadent alterations of that time likened them as a cold, rough “winter”, full of decadence and alterations. Still, this characterization, apart from being a statement, was predominantly and primarily a call of the faithful and an invitation of the people for a “theological spring”, and a springboard

for the Church to restart its mission, overcoming the internal decadent erosions. “Winter” here is the loss of the Church as an image of the Kingdom and the Last Days: when the Church is caught up in history, she loses her hypostatic idiom, her eschatological essence.

If we carefully study the sequence of that era’s historical events and compare it with our present Postmodern era, which has started about two generations ago, examining in parallel the relationship with the corresponding alterations that occur today, we will find that an analogous and similar “winter” has taken hold.

In other words, the postmodern features –multifaceted and ambivalent– which distinguish the contemporary society, are beginning to appear within the Church; within it, there are evasions and alterations; outside in society, massive changes, rapid developments and, consequently, postmodern deconstructions.

If we recall the 8th-9th centuries, we will find that the battle against the Icons, known as Iconoclasm, was essentially a battle from both outside and inside against the Church’s *eschatological icon*, i.e. a battle against *the Church as the Icon of the Kingdom* in history. It then took a whole century (731-843) and the Seventh Ecumenical Council for the Church itself to theologize and clarify the icon of her eschatological essence in history. Only when she clarified the latter synodically, did she confront the galloping “winter” by setting at the beginning of the ecclesiastical year as a marker for the course of the ecclesiastical body through history and time, not the First or Fourth, but the Seventh Ecumenical Council – i.e., by putting forward the memory and theology of the Seventh Ecumenical Council of the Church as an Icon of the Kingdom in history, it marks the Church’s eschatological essence in history and at the (every) beginning of the ecclesiastical year.

The same features are also leaving their footprint in our postmodern era – the second winter that has just been inaugurated. The sense of Eschatology and the fundamental ontological experience that the Church is and exists as the entrance of the Last Days and God’s Kingdom into history has begun to wane within a context of virtual reality of the Church’s own intangible reality.

The secularization and the consequent religious instrumentalization of the Church within History reveals that from an eschatological-historical

reality it has been transformed into a “historical-historical” phenomenon with a thoroughly deceptive secular eschatology, thus losing the reality of the true eschatology. An indicative and representative example of this process –one among many– is the following: it was recently discussed in the Permanent Holy Synod [24.8.2023] about the position of the [second] Crucified One behind the Holy Altar. At first glance, the issue seems to be customary and meaningless; yet, it is the trigger of a central theological problem and the tip of the iceberg. When the Church proceeds towards the Last Days within history and places before her a momentary event of the history of the past as her guideline and beacon, it essentially cuts off the Last Days from History, replacing them with History through a past event, so that the Church becomes an absolutely intra-historical event completely independent from the Last Days and the Kingdom of Heavens. The case of the anti-liturgical position of the [second] Crucifixion at the aforementioned point in the church is also indicative of the “embankments” that affected the ecclesiastical body in the otherwise corrupting time of the Fall. To recall the Lord’s parabolic word, she is being transformed into a Church without *ἄλας ἀλόμενον*, not seized and taken by men. The de-Christianization of our two millennia of Christian societies is largely due to this phenomenon of the “desalination of the Church”. In other words, it is about the Church’s autonomy from the Kingdom of Heaven and its consequent entrapment in History, while it is transforming itself into History, thus acquiring the characteristics of the Fall displayed by the *noncommunal* History.

Church-Canonical View of the Question

Let us continue approaching the question under consideration with another visible fact: It is “*the end of the territory*”, a widely discussed subject, that has been identified as a dominant feature of the emerging Postmodernity⁵!

5. See B. Badié, *La fin des territoires. Essai sur le désordre international et sur l’unité sociale du respect*, Fayard [coll. L’espace politique], Paris 1995, 278 pp. Cf. our article: «Κανονικές προεκτάσεις ἐκ τῆς χοήσεως τῶν Μ.Μ.Ε. ἀπὸ τὶς Τοπικές Ἐκκλησίες (Μία πρώτη δεκαετία ἐλευθέρας ἐκκλησιαστικῆς ῥαδιοφωνίας, ἀλλὰ καὶ “μὴ κανονικῆς ἐναρμονίσεως”)», *Κληρονομία/Kleronomia* 30, I-II (1998), pp. 201-218.

As it is well known, the two thousand years of ecclesiastical-canonical tradition has been founded on *the ground of the Holy Eucharist / Thanksgiving* (canon 5/A'). The Church has developed the institution of the *Local Church-Bishopric* by establishing *local-territorial ecclesiastical entities-alterities*, which are called to be in *Eucharistic communion* with each other. *Territorial ecclesiastical alterities in Eucharistic communion*: This has been the practice and life of the Church during the two past millennia, which include two distinct eras: Premodern (1st-15th century) and Modern Times (16th-20th century).

The early Postmodern era coincides visibly and tangibly with the feature we've mentioned above, the "*end of the territory*". This means in practice that, within the "*space of the Church*", every known concept of *a distinct territorial entity* with its corresponding *outlined / bordered Church Body*, as it is understood by the Canonical Tradition of the Church, is abolished and lost. Indeed, it acknowledges the territorial ecclesiastical entities-alterities, which, following a systematic presentation, are: 1) the *Parish*, which belongs to the Local Church, 2) the *Local Church-Episcopate* and 3) the local [*Territorial*] *Church* – Patriarchate / Autocephalous / Autonomous / Semi-autonomous Church. In the context of the newly appeared intangible Postmodern reality, all this seems outdated; this fact simply reminds us of what the Church was like 2000 years ago. Nevertheless, a question arises: Along with the "*end of the territory*", will we also experience the "*end of the Church*"? For example, the parish has already been lost: "I live at home and don't go to church, and it's the same"; thus, the church is turning into a non-church and/or a tele-parish. I hasten to anticipate you: I'm not speaking about an *ontological* end of the Church, as Christ denies it, since "*and the gates of Hades will not overcome it*"⁶, but an end on a geographical level – the "*geographical, territorial end of the Church*"!

This means that, apart from the loss of the geographical concepts of the Parish and Local Church, terms that are primarily eucharistically territorial, the concept of ecclesiastical-episcopal jurisdiction is also lost, as it was validated as a prior practice, defined and officially established

6. See *Matth.* 16, 18.

by the First Ecumenical Council (can. 5/A'-325), where the *absolute identification of territorial jurisdiction and personal jurisdiction* is shown; because of this, the alteration and loss of the role of the bishop in the field of his eschatological mission is further extended. At this point we should reflect upon the issues arisen from this situation. In other words, from the moment that the *geo-ecclesiality* was lost, *the territorial Eucharistic jurisdiction* was lost by extension.

The neologism *geo-ecclesiasticality* derives from the co-extensive terms “geo-“, the lexical prefix denoting what is related to the earth as a territory, and *ecclesiasticality*, the idiom referring to the Church’s dual hypostasis⁷ Therefore, *geo-ecclesiasticality* is *geography* [= writing on the earth, in the *place* (→ topography → writing on, inscribing in a place)], i.e. the “*inscription* [= in-scription, in-scribing]” of an Ecclesiastical Body, a *Local Church* and a *territorial Church* in a given place, where the Church is *incarnated* (= appears, presents itself, manifests itself, manifests itself pastorally, etc.). The Church is not defined by the place/territory, yet the latter constitutes the outlined and clearly defined field with given and defined boundaries and features, where the Church is incarnated. Thus, each specified and given place objectively offers the best possible use of its characteristics in the apparent preservation of the Ecclesiastical Body’s unity.

To sum up, in the Local Church, it is not the place –as an adjective – that defines the Church, but, due to the presence of the one and only Church in it, territoriality is defined as *eucharistic*; in turn, this *eucharistic territoriality* defines the place as unity and singularity. In other words, the *eucharistic territoriality* as singularity and unity precedes the Church’s *locality* which (the *local Church*), as an adjective, recapitulates the whole.

Thus, when the *eucharistic territoriality* is abolished by the Territorial Autocephalous Churches in the name of the “end of the territory”, then the way is opened for the creation of overriding jurisdictions at the level of the Local and/or Territorial Church, and, consequently, for the creation of successive “universal Orthodox Churches” – a novel ecclesiastical reality unknown for the previous two millennia. This new reality was pioneered by the Roman Catholic Church (First Vatican Council of 1870)

7. Cf. *Acts* 15, 28.

and has been thereafter imitated by the Orthodox territorial Churches (Bulgarian territorial schism in 1870, the unjustified emergence of the Orthodox “Diaspora”-1895/1922 onwards, the publication of Charters –in a heterotopic conception of Protestant-like *constitutional pluralism*, which we must also urgently address– with the formation of “Universal Churches”-Cyprus 1980, Russia 1988 & 2000, Romania 2010, infiltration of the Russian Patriarchate in Africa-2019, multiplication, development and extension of overriding jurisdictions in the Orthodox “Diaspora”, etc.).

Consequently, the Orthodox Christians, along with the Roman Catholics and Protestant Christians, primarily for ethno-racial reasons, and more recently because of ethno-political expediency, have deconstructed the Church –and are continuing to do so– in its fundamental *geo-eucharist* features. That is why we should not name and normalize the practice of overriding jurisdictions in all of their various manifestations. To these divergent anti-ecclesiological and anticanonical reasons, we should add those that are immerging in our new intangible postmodern era – digital technology and AI, which is tending to become a techno-religion and religious substitute in the age of modern technocracy.

Perhaps we have not yet realized how serious things are due to digital technology’s rapid development. The latter is characterized by the “encoding” of each person separately and all people, as is the case, for example, with machinery or spare parts coming from abroad with a specific code – a personal code that will be associated with what is presented as each person’s “name”.

In this way, what man is as a living being and a creation of God, i.e. a unique and unrepeatable person, is abolished. By receiving his personal code, man does not only become a mere subject of the flourishing technology, and a tool of a huge and global machine. Most importantly, man ceases to be God’s creation with an eschatological life course; he is transformed into a product like all other (consumer) goods produced by modern industry; he is turning into a machine construct. This will probably have disastrous consequences since, as a defective product is withdrawn and destroyed, humanity could possibly experience “sewage plants”, where human waste will be disposed of. If this seems like a

science fiction scenario, we need only recall the horrors of Nazism for all those who lacked the Aryan race's features.

The world stubbornly denies its reference to the only Creator; through the technology, it acquires self-sufficiency of speech and movement, creating its own kingdom (virtual reality, artificial intelligence, etc.). The difficulty of the Church and the challenge it is facing while using the means provided by technology is not an easy task. If the Church denies this world, it exposes itself to two dangers: firstly, that the world will deny it and lose the reach of its message; and secondly, that it will be seen as outdated and obsolete. The most difficult thing for the Church is to ultimately avoid its secularization and self-idolization. If we believe that the Church is bringing new tidings to the world, it will most certainly use every secular means to bring it as far away as possible. After a while, though, the message will need to be renewed and corrected, because it will be perceived as obsolete, like everything else that is recyclable in a constantly changing world⁸.

In the emerging postmodern era, the concept and reality of the Parish – Local Church – the Church in general, which has been transformed into a Virtual Church, no longer exists. The Church as we knew it no longer exists. The anxiety caused by these changes it is experienced by all who see and perceive what is coming, but first and foremost by the bishops, “who correctly handle the word of truth” («ὅρθοτομεῖν τὸν λόγον τῆς ἀληθείας»)⁹. The sooner we grasp these facts of this new coming age and its implications, the sooner the witness of the Church will continue to be active. This is true as long as the bishop's mission remains the promotion of the theology of the Church, who must be aware of the doctrines and pastoral teachings, since all hierarchs are theologians. A Church without theology has no future.

Thus, with the loss of *Eucharistic territoriality*, the role of the bishop was consequently downgraded, but the opposite also happened. Indeed, in the present era, as a consequence of the “loss” of the aforementioned distinct triptych: *parish – local Church – place Church*, the concept, dimension and role of the bishop has been completely lost. Consequently, in our

8. G. Grammati, *Ἐκκλησία καὶ Τεχνολογία*, Athens [Ἐργασία πολυγραφημένη κατατεθείσα στὸ Ἰδρυμα Ποιμαντικῆς Ἐπιμορφώσεως (Ι.Π.Ε.) τῆς Ιερᾶς Αρχιεπισκοπῆς Αθηνῶν], 2022, p. 38.

9. Cf. 2 Tim. 2, 15.

emerging new era, an important and seminal task for us will be to restore the bishop's charism (as St. Hippolytus of Rome understands it¹⁰), as a connecting link.

The bishops within the Church have a supreme mission: to connect people and all of creation with Christ. Even when a Local Church is not socially active, this mission remains of primary importance, undiminished and unwavering. Let us bishops cast off the anxiety lest we will be "accused" of doing nothing, only indulging in charitable works, competing with the welfare state; that is, we should avoid the temptation to sacrifice the priority of the Church's eschatological essence and slip into intra-historical priorities and futile exclusivities. Dionysios Psarianos, blessed Metropolitan of Servia and Kozani, used to be emphatic on this issue: "The Triune God will review as bishops, not as contractors". This means that the Church has transformed into something else; it is closer to the *social* being than to the *ontological* one. Saint Porphyry, our contemporary, has accordingly commented: "If the state takes over the rebuilding of churches and charity, what will be left for the clergy to do?"

It effortlessly follows from the examples mentioned above that in the present conjuncture, in the midst of which we find ourselves, the Church is "attacked" from both sides: from the outside, by the intangible postmodernity; from the inside, by post-ecclesiality.

The two "winters" that the Church has experienced in its two millennia of history are the decadent alterations of the 8th-9th centuries and the *post-ecclesiasticality*, the contemporary *ecclesiastical post-modernity*. The present "winter" is composed of the parallel *existence* and *synthesis* of *galloping postmodernity* and *decadent post-ecclesiasticality*.

Intangible Postmodernity and Tangible Post-Christianity

A concept nowadays completely misunderstood is the one that one understands by the word *thing*. We often refer to "things" with a tendency to belittle, and a dismissive tone; we easily looked upon "things" as being

10. See B. Botte, *La Tradition apostolique de Saint Hippolyte (Essai de reconstitution)*, Aschendorffsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, LQF-Band 39, Münster Westfalen 1989, 132 p. (cf. SC 11 bis).

quite opposite to man, wishing to perpetuate, perhaps unknowingly, the perception of matter and spirit as mutually incompatible, as two categories which their paths are impossible to cross each other. We perceive the “thing” as being something petty and vile, equivalent to the Latin *res*, cheap and unworthy when compared with man’s primacy, as if man consisted exclusively of spirit or, according to the Platonic and Neoplatonic view, of a soul that has the qualities of being immortal in itself, as opposed to a body that is earthy, base and subject to decay and death.

Thus, many times we correspondingly speak of “things” as products of technology –and, in some cases, of art–, whose value is honored according to their utility, how they serve man and are connected and combined with man’s voracious desire for the unceasing conquest of all science and the universe.

However, we forget the etymological course of the word: a *thing* is the result of the action of *doing*, the subject of which is man. Therefore, the thing is connected with the *doing* of man, is organically bound to him, and its value is equal to man. The “thing” is defined as the love of two people that motivates them to move from their immobile position towards a course of meeting and coming together. A thing is the lesson that the teacher delivers to his students as a result of the action, which has as its starting point the love for the transmission of knowledge. A thing is the ministry of the clergyman the starting point of which is the same love for man. A thing is the act of healing that the physician offers to the sick person as a result of his love for man, for the elimination of his suffering. A thing as a result of doing is every loving action of a man towards another man, at all levels of our mundane daily life.

Nevertheless, because of the distorted aberration in which we live and the fact that we worshipped Mammon more than Christ, we have given to all things utilitarian and monetary value, flattened and trampled them; because we have abdicated it, we’ve deprived them of their hetero-referentiality. Instead of the eschatological kingdom of our hetero-existence, we’ve preferred the mundane tyranny of our self-existence. We have lost the view towards Heaven and beyond History, and we have rejected the eschatological in favor of the univocal present. Yet all things are sacred, just as nature and the world are sacred; and the man is the

steward of all Creation. We must be criticized, though, for our negative attitude towards every technological innovation; the things we have accused in the first place, we then adopt them. Instead of a theological initiative and affirmation “on how we might derive benefit from scientific progress” (to paraphrase the title of the well-known *Address to the Young* by Basil the Great), we are firmly committed ourselves to reaction and retrograde heterocentrism.

The Church’s starting point was the ontological belief that it did not appear and was not founded as a religion. This fact contributed to the bankruptcy of all the man-made co-existent pagan religions; already in the 4th century, the pagan temples have been turned into historical remnants. By exploring our new age, we could observe that its idioms and characteristics that have already emerged suggest that the Church will follow the same path; it will become a historical remnant, as Christians have turned the Kingdom of God within the context of History into a secularly oriented religion, and Its expectation into a secular eschatology.

Thus, from the “return of religion” to the public sphere, the new *retour de religion*, the common faith, as the apostle Paul understands it¹¹, evolves into an individual-individualist –under the influence of the Reformation– rather than a collective-communal-church affair. The post-Reformation gradual secularization of both society and the Church is welcomed by those who see religion –putting the Church in the same bag– as an “old-fashioned”, outdated, perhaps even obsolete anachronism that goes against Cartesian logic. In practice, this means that the gap between the Church (as far as we are concerned) and the rampantly secularized postmodern society is growing and deepening. The wear and tear continues, as it is expressed in the dichotomy: “Church-secularization/dechristianization”.

Due to the galloping *post-secularization*, a new phenomenon in uncharted waters, the Church’s ontological influence and theology is largely fading away like a flimsy veil. This can be seen in the existing significant generational differentiations, especially among the younger generation in the question of church faith and their participation in the *Church*. The same generational variations are also significant and notable in the

11. «Ἐστι πίστις ἐλπιζομένων ὑπόστασις, πραγμάτων ἔλεγχος οὐ βλεπομένων» (*Hebr. 11, 1*).

issue of the frequency of participation in communal-liturgical life and the extent to which this is an integral part of their daily lives. The two age extremes that are nowadays flooding our parishes, the grandparents and grandchildren (aged 1-10 and 60-90 years old), show that the Church is sustained by infant baptism and the blind agony of death respectively. This means that we have lost the world, precisely because we do not offer it an ontological surplus of life, but “religion as opium”. The Church remains important insofar as it continues feeding the customs and traditions of our society, sometimes turning itself into a custom, being caught up in the “present century” («νῦν αἰῶνα»)¹².

Church had begun “fading away” in people’s eyes as soon as it became a religion. Indeed, if we study carefully the 4th century, we will easily notice a historical change that was taking place quietly, yet visibly and steadily: the twilight of one world and the dawn of another. Now, the dawn of the other, new postmodern world, what will the Church look like? “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?” («Εἰ ὁ Υἱὸς τοῦ Ἀνθρώπου ἐλθὼν, εὑρήσει τὴν Ἐκκλησίαν ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς;»)¹³.

The sunsetting pagan world was strongly characterized by elements of existential decadence; as Christianity was expanding geographically, the decadence of paganism was increasingly revealed.

The Church at that time was abundantly distinguished by leading theological minds and saints. It was full of vitality, and this contributed to its rightfully taking over the overall spiritual hegemony and intellectual leadership of the society at all levels of life. Theology’s main characteristic was that it always took the lead in the humanity’s intra-historical events. Thanks to this, the philosophy was absorbed by the theology of the Church, precisely because the latter offered an ontological way out of the existential impasse of philosophy.

Christians were boasting that of all the questions posed by Greek antiquity and philosophy in general, there was none left that it had not been answered. Can we make the same claim today? This ontological pride was lost along the way, and especially nowadays; Christians are being saved and carried away by socio-political oscillations without a

12. See *1 Tim.* 6, 17 and *2 Tim.* 4, 10.

13. Cf. *Luke* 18, 8.

clear path and a “hegemonic spirit”. They always act out of reaction to something that has happened and never out of initiative: as they are facing with *intangible postmodernity*, they adopt a *tangible/material post-Christianity*, i.e. conflictual resistance and fundamentalist violence – heterocentric methods that have nothing to do with the ontological anointed witness of Christian martyrs throughout the ages.

We are on the cusp of a historical era where the dominant worldview is that of the multiple socio-technological revolutions of which the major feature and consequence is the exponential increase of post-modern deconstructions. At this historical turning point of *Posthumanism*, in which we are living, a completely different era is beginning and another society is being born. We are now called upon to ask ourselves how we should act, what we should do to create the conditions for a true encounter of the Gospel and the Church with all those of our contemporaries who proclaim an absolute indifference to the faith of Christ and at the same time face an almost unbridgeable spiritual void.

Our Church can neither allow itself to avoid facing the difficulties of the “present [postmodern] century” nor ignore the latter’s fears and doubts. Instead, it is invited –and we are invited– to receive them through a [ontological] struggle of initiative and ontological creativity, – to use Dostoevsky’s beautiful image: “to put on our shoulders the weight of the world’s agony”; laying it down, most certainly, but also bearing it and taking the burden with humility. It is up to us to find the right words, the modern discourse, to convince that the theology of the Church is a “theology of thanksgiving and celebration, of feast and eschatological joy”, in which thought is illuminated in the liturgical mystery – in other words, in the reason for life and death, for resurrection and noncommunal corruption.

“If it is true”, writes the French writer Françoise Giroud in one of her books¹⁴, “that agnosticism and atheism are overwhelmingly present in the cultural landscape of our time, it would be no less true that they simultaneously coexist with an existential thirst of the people of our dawning era”; she adds: “Who would dare to argue otherwise, at

14. See her work: *On ne peut pas être heureux tout le temps*, Fayard, Paris 2001.

a time when militant atheism is today retreating in the face of those who claim non-religion (sans religion) and replace the word infidelity with the word de-faithfulness (décroyance)?” Therefore, apart from the ideological warfare of past modernity against the Church, there is nowadays something even more calamitous: the indifference and de-faithfulness. The historical Church seems to have come full circle in history, since it has ceased to be ontologically attractive and to ensure the universal participation of the people.

Many things are broken; to this, everyone agrees. Because of the fact that humanity is simultaneously living in different times, the contemporary ecclesiastical field is characterized by procrastination, spinning, twisting, and the total absence of initiative before reaching to a solution to the wrongs of the world. It is clear that the theological vigor, which characterized the Councils of the first millennium, is largely absent. Yet no one, no Church or Synod, is taking any initiative like those taken by the Synods, ecumenical and otherwise, of the first millennium.

Postmodernity encourages the asymmetry of relations, structures and things. That is why this asymmetry leads to deconstruction.

De-Christianization and Re-Evangelization: A Mismatched Quest to Avoiding De-Christianization

The de-Christianization of believers/baptized is taking place today because of the declining pastoral care. To recall what St. Gregory the Theologian painfully observes: «τὰ τῆς Ἐκκλησίας ἀποίμαντα»¹⁵. Instead of reactivating (and carrying out) the pastoral care, we are launching, by mimicking Western Christianity, the heterocentric message of re-evangelization, which is missionary work to non-baptized believers. Still, we should not speak about the re-evangelization of believers, but about “pastoral care”: our flocks remain scandalously uncared. Marriages, at least those that have been left for us to perform(!), baptisms of infants and funerals do not constitute primary elements of pastoral care. And that’s all we have left with. We see again the people left to us to marry in the totally secularized baptism of their children and then in the

15. Gregory the Theologian, «Εὐδοξίω Πήτορι», Επιστολὴ 80, PG 37, col. 153C.

funerals of their parents. We are still wondering what has caused the gradual de-Christianization after this decimated reality? From the outside, postmodernity; from the inside, our uncared flock! The Church is endangered first of all by the clergy, who have forgotten to be clergy.

Nevertheless, what is needed for the fabled re-evangelization to be realized are vital Communities desiring the God's Kingdom and having missionary zeal, not nostalgists or adherents of a systemic or national religion, as the Orthodox Church has nowadays evolved. The Synodality that bounds the Body of Church for the last two millennia, as a *communal* event of the highest importance (cf. «Ἐκκλησία συνόδου ὅνομα»¹⁶), has largely faded away in recent years, while the Church's canonical systems have been massed with secularized socio-political attitudes and structures.

The “intangible future”¹⁷ Last Days of the Kingdom of Heaven are already made manifest in the Divine Liturgy and its aftermath. This means that, in the future intangible reality, only within Its bosom does the progressive intangible relationship of people become a material communion of persons in Christ. Thus, the Divine Liturgy's eschatological-historical “already but not yet” abolishes the agonizing progressive tug-of-war of the receding materiality and coming intangibility of the contemporary historical reality. For this reason, the undefined amorphous future history events can only be dealt with pastorally and only through the abandoned pastoral care of peoples on the basis of the Divine Liturgy and the liturgical tradition of the Church.

Indicative Proposals for the Postmodern Era

- To re-organize the Local Church in its full form, with all its constituent gifts and elements, exactly as it had emerged within the bosom of the Church's Canonical Tradition.
- To re-establish the Metropolitan System as a manifestation of material and embodied ecclesial communion that has been operating for

16. John Chrysostom, PG 55, col. 493; cf. v. 61, col. 527.

17. Cf. *Hebr.* 13, 14.

19 consecutive centuries in the Church's synodical life. The reintroduction of the Metropolitan System will reduce, and might eventually abolish, the institution of the auxiliary and/or titular bishop, which is unknown in the Canonical Tradition of the Church and anticanonical, and increase the number of provincial bishops per region. Undoubtedly, the existence of the "assistant" bishop constitutes an intangible, malign episcopal reality within the Local Church. An indicative starting point would be the informal re-establishment of the Metropolitan System through the forgotten institution of the *Choroepiskopoi*, where the ecclesiastical-canonical deadlock caused by the growth of the non-canonical practice of "assistant and/or titular bishops" would signal a return to the canonic legitimacy. Thus, the reintroduction of the Metropolitan system represents an affirmation of the material personal communion and –by extension– of the intimate communion of the Local Churches; therefore, it would represent a dynamic reversal of the intangible reality at the synodical level and the emergence of the material ecclesiasticality. In the same context –the reconstitution of the Metropolitan System–, the reconstruction and readjustment of the boundaries of the parishes should be included, according to the new geopolitical situation of the dawning era.

– (This will have as a consequence of bringing the three levels of Synodality back into fully operational mood. As it is well known, the three Synodality levels are: 1) the Metropolitan, 2) the Autocephalous/Patriarchal and 3) the Decapentarchy one. It is no coincidence, moreover, that the Roman Catholic Church –which for several centuries during the second millennium and under Protestant influence limited its pastoral and missionary activity to matters of individual morality and social work, not delving into the Church's Being in itself– is undergoing a change of direction, seeking urgently and persistently the lost Synodality through a variety of initiatives and events. We, as Orthodox, have always had the Synodical system; it remains for us to fill it with the content it rightfully deserves.

– To put an effort for the bishop's charisma to be restored in his local Church and in the Church in general, in order to avoid the currently observed heterocentered efforts for his substitution, which contribute to the post-ecclesiastical deconstruction of the Church.

– To reform the Church’s canonical tradition, in order to make clear and visible its course towards the Last Days and the Kingdom of Heaven. This will definitely entail *renouncing* things and situations, and it is not certain that we are prepared to suffer *sacrifices for reversing the present state of things* and shaking off any impediments.

– To create a “Synodical Observatory of Postmodernity” for approaching the multifariously emerging postmodern society and initiating a multidimensional dialogue with the State, society, social agents and various aggregations, in order to ensure via this Observatory, the coordination and eschatological sameness of the Christian witness in the coming era.

If we do not clear the church institutions and ecclesiastical customs and rites from the impending embankments and institutional miscegenation of the past, the Church will suffer and sway in ever-increasing peregrinations, pathologies and pathogenies. Our knowledge of the Sacred Canons’ content –metaphorically speaking, is just the knowledge of the tip of the iceberg, whereas in the reef of the unseen huge piece of the iceberg there are uncharted issues that we will need to address (pastorally) as a Church in the post-modernity era. As the Orthodox brethren, we are reaching an era of canonical agnosticism and apathy; it seems that this is already well underway here.

Addendum

T. S. Eliot says that “Time present and time past / are both perhaps present in time future”, while R. H. Tawny emphatically reminds to us that “The past reveals in the present [and in the future] what the present [and the future] is able to see”; and Yuv. N. Harari adds: “History is attached to the past and accompanies us firmly into the future”. This means that the past plays a decisive role in the course and development of the present and the future. It is precisely here that we are called upon to determine our attitude towards the past that has been bequeathed to us:

- Should we outrightly reject it?
- Should we approach it educationally, willing to gain knowledge and experience from it?

– Should we critically use it and avoid its mistakes?

We cannot change the past and history; still, we can avoid committing further errors and eliminate theological impurities. This means that we have to distance ourselves from them and act purely theologically, i.e. eschatologically, as Christ precisely proposes, by discarding “both old and new”¹⁸ and giving priority to the Last Days, by recovering the path that leads towards them.

Thus, the dominant *problems* for the Church during the second millennium are ecclesiastical-canonical and are bequeathed to the third millennium. The most basic of all is *Ecclesiastical Culturalism*, namely *Ritualism* for the Roman Catholic Church (since 1099), *Conciliarism/Confessionalism* for the Protestant Churches (since 1517) and *Ethno-racialism* for the Orthodox Church (since 1872). The Orthodox Church is called upon to study this multifaceted dominant problem and to offer by extension canonical solutions in the dawning era for all the relevant problems and their multiple aspects, especially those two that concern the *canonical territory* and the *corresponding Orthodox “Diasporas” (overriding jurisdictions)*. Added to these are the newly emerging and major *anthropological problems* that have emerged rapidly and within a few decades in the postmodern era.

Some argue that we are living in the Late modern era of late modernity and we have not yet entered the postmodern one. However, whether we are already or not yet, one thing is indisputable: the ongoing and galloping post-Christianity will bring and accelerate postmodernity with heterocentric ideological proposals; above all, it will consolidate the *Post-Ecclesiasticality*, or, better and more precisely, the *Ecclesiastical post-modernity* in the contemporary post-modern reality...

We could also claim that we are leading the Church into decline –if we have not already accomplice that– not by our hostile actions, but by homeopathic choices that inevitably lead to decadence. Ecclesiasticality is being altered, alienated and dissolved; this inevitably leads to the dechristianization of traditionally Christian peoples and societies.

There are two things we are called upon to do at the beginning and the start of this new postmodern era, which are contained in two words: *challenges* and *course*. In other words, we are called to contemplate and

18. See *Matth.* 13, 52.

understand the emerging peculiar and unprecedented challenges, so that the Church, –and all of us–, in our eschatological-historical journey, can take initiatives for dialogue –and not to react in a hysterical or fundamentalist manner–, that will give theological and eschatological way outs to the deadlocks of Fall into which, even in this emerging age, our post-Fall, non-sociable society continues to slide, sinking unstoppably into them. Our initiative should be purely theological and eschatological, liberating us from the recurring deadlocks throughout history.

Christians are a microcosm, without being a leaven¹⁹ for society and humanity. The world goes forth, without taking notice of our presence... Therefore, the future –if there one– of the Church’s presence in the public sphere during the postmodern era largely depends on the way in which it testifies and will testify its theological witness in our contemporary postmodern world.

Today, more than ever, we hold our fate in our own hands. Therefore, “we look ahead, when we have not forgotten what is to come”.

19. See *1 Cor.* 5, 6-8; cf. *Gal.* 5, 9.